

Local business receives international award

Writer
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To say that the last five years or so have been difficult for the local abalone industry would be an understatement. Surviving a major red tide episode in 2017, during which 36% of the stock was lost, was difficult enough for Abagold, the largest aquaculture company in our area (and one of the three biggest in the world). When that was followed by two years of Covid lockdown, bringing the export trade to a virtual standstill, the future looked bleak.

All the sweeter then was the news that it had been selected as the recipient of the prestigious Friend of the Sea Sustainability Award for 2022. On 25 June, during a festive ceremony at the Abagold farm in the New Harbour, Paolo Bray, Founder and Director of Friend of the Sea and Friend of the Earth, based in Italy, personally presented an elegantly-designed plaque to Tim Hedges, Managing Director of the company.

Friend of the Sea is an international NGO whose mission is to promote environmental conservation. The

organisation has become the leading certification standard for products and services which respect and protect the marine environment. Its certification rewards sustainable practices in Fisheries, Aquaculture, Fishmeal and Omega 3 Fish Oil. It's the only sustainable fisheries certification process recognised and supervised globally by a National Accreditation Body.

Annual audits are carried out onsite by independent international certification bodies in consultation with stakeholders, against the strict Friend of the Sea environmental sustainability and social accountability criteria. It also promotes conservation initiatives for protection of the ocean. Founded in 2008 by Bray, one of its early success stories was the dolphin-safe tuna project which saved millions of dolphins from death in tuna fishing nets and started the sustainable seafood movement.

According to Friend of the Sea, 'sustainable seafood can include seafood products that are either caught or farmed using methods that respect the long-term viability or sustainability of the species, the

integrity and health of the oceans and the livelihood of the farming or fisheries-dependent communities.' Its certification mark can be found on approximately 5 000 products produced by 1 500 companies in more than 80 countries world-wide. Abagold is proud to have successfully completed the annual certification process for the past eight years.

Abagold was founded in 1984 by local veterinarian, Dr Pierre Hugo, who became aware that the local abalone (*Haliotis midae*) numbers in the ocean seemed to be decreasing. His aim at the time was to develop a sustainable breeding programme that could help to restock the ocean. Thirty eight years later, Abagold runs four farms spread over 13 Ha, producing in the region of 650 tons of abalone per year, and employs just under 400 staff members. Approximately 95% of its products are exported, generating much-needed foreign currency.

As Tim Hedges emphasises, for Abagold sustainability goes beyond the product. It's a continuous process of capital investment in infrastructure and, currently, development of an integrated power supply, including



At the award ceremony Abagold was presented with the prestigious 2022 Friend of the Sea Award for Aquaculture. From left are members of the Abagold research and environmental impact team, Kabelo Manyama, Sarah Halse, Tim Hedges (Managing Director), Livhuwani Netenzenhi, Reitumetse Phokontsi and Paolo Bray (FOS)

PHOTO: Supplied

the installation of an extensive solar panel array, which will assist in reducing adverse environmental effects and at the same time facilitate uninterrupted product production and processing. They are also exploring the possibility of a partnership with a company in Oman, which will have the capacity to produce another 600 tons of a different species of abalone on a 100% organic basis.

"Certification by Friend of the Sea is extremely important to us," he says. "Our biggest markets are in countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and China, where abalone is looked upon as 'white gold' and our clients are

beginning to ask for certification. The Friend of the Sea mark of approval is the only one of its kind recognised internationally, so it's a source of pride for us to carry it on all our products."

The Friend of the Sea citation for Abagold's Sustainable Award for Aquaculture is for its "commitment to sustainable aquaculture production, its renewable energy program and general environmental awareness initiatives!"

To learn more about Abagold's intriguing farming operation visit its website www.abagold.com, or even better, arrange to go on a guided tour.



PHOTOS: Southern Right Charters



An awe-inspiring sight: A female Southern Right whale giving birth in Walker Bay... and moments later the calf is swimming on its own.

Witnessing rare sighting of a whale birth

Out in the middle of Walker Bay, during the return trip of one of Southern Right Charters' afternoon whale-watching tours last week, the crew and passengers aboard were treated to a once-in-a-lifetime experience when they witnessed a whale birth – from front-row seats.

As a whale surfaced within relatively close proximity to the boat, it quickly became apparent to the crew onboard that this was not going to be your everyday encounter! The whale rolled over, exposing her underside with a large area of water around her quickly turning dark red.

"It was literally a matter of seconds – as fast as it took us to realise what was going on – for it all to happen!" said an excited Ash Appleby of Southern Right Charters. "Out came the little one, leaving everyone on the boat in absolute awe."

Ash says what really stood out was the remarkable agility of the youngster from its very first breath. "It was able to swim, manoeuvre and shallow dive – all unassisted by its proud mom!"

Having operated in Walker Bay for over two decades, Southern Right Charters have never witnessed a

live whale birth; in fact Ash says there are no known records of this kind of sighting anywhere in the southern hemisphere, and only a handful known in the north.

Because of this, there is a lot of mystery around the birthing of whales. "I will never know, in an ocean so big, why the whale chose to give us this absolutely remarkable display.

Humbling doesn't even come close to the feeling, as even now – a week later – I'm not sure any of us onboard (crew or passengers) have realised the magnitude of the event," says Ash.

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